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Video Game Ratings: Does the System Work for Parents?

Alexis Diane Brekke
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Alexis Diane Brekke entitled "Video Game Ratings: Does the System Work for Parents?." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Communication.

Carolyn Lepre, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Naeemah Clark, Catherine Luther

Accepted for the Council:
Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Video Game Ratings: Does the System Work for Parents?

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Science Degree
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Alexis Diane Brekke
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes of parents toward the video game rating system. This relatively new medium and industry have rapidly grown in popularity in recent years. The industry-regulated rating system designed to help parents make choices about video games has made the news of late because of the possibility of government intervention into its practices.

Parents who buy video games for their children participated in a focus group or an in-depth interview. Topics under investigation were the extent to which parents understood and trusted the rating system, how they used the system and how they felt about the possibility of government involvement in the video game industry.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Video games are a popular activity in the United States with nearly half of all Americans playing console and/or computer video games (ESA Facts & Research, 2006). This pastime is popular with people of all ages, and adults between the age of 18 and 35 make up the largest group of frequent players (43%); children under the age of 18 make up 35% of video game players; followed by adults over age 50, who make up 19% of gamers (ESA 2005 Essential Facts, 2006). Video game consoles are present in the homes of 83% percent of children ages 8 through 18; and 40% of those children have the consoles in their bedrooms (FTC Alert, 2005). In 2005, sales of video games, including hardware, software and accessories, reached a record $10.5 billion, up from $9.9 billion in 2004 (The NPD Group, 2006).

Video games, as a medium, are no different from other media in terms of the variation of game styles and content. Games can range in style from puzzles, to role playing, to sports, to racing, to first-person shooters. With children making up 35% of video game players (ESA 2005 Essential Facts, 2006), this means that many parents are buying games for their children. A little over a decade ago, a rating system was developed to help parents negotiate the content of the thousands of video game titles available.

Twelve years after it was first established there is debate over whether this system is working. One major event that fueled this debate took place in the summer of 2005, when it was discovered that a graphic sex scene was hidden on the game disc of an M-rated game. Some argued that the rating system could be failing parents and that

legislation to regulate the industry was necessary. The purpose of this study is to explore the feelings of parents who buy video games toward the rating system, which was designed to help them make choices about video game purchases.

The video game industry has been self-regulating its content with the rating system created and maintained by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board since its formation in 1994. The rating system includes both age-based ratings categories, such as the rating T for teens aged 13 and older, as well as content descriptors such as "Fantasy Violence" or "Use of Alcohol." According to the organization's Web site, the rating system "helps parents and other consumers choose the games that are right for their families" (ESRB, 2006).

This voluntary rating system reviews "virtually all games that are sold at retail" according to the rating system's Web site (ESRB, 2006). One might question the meaning of the words "virtually all games" in the ESRB's claim, but since they are a self-regulating body in a self-regulating industry, we can only take their word to mean "almost all games." There is no indication on the ESRB's Web site as to why a game publisher would choose not to submit a game to the rating and reviewing process. The ESRB rated 1,133 games in 2005; 50% were rated E for Everyone, 24% were rated T for Teen, 12% were rated M for Mature, 12% were rated E10+ for Everyone 10 and older, 1% were rated EC for Early Childhood and less than 1% were rated Adults Only (ESRB About, 2006).

The ESRB was frequently in the news throughout the summer of 2005 for its handling of what is known as the 'Hot Coffee' controversy. 'Hot Coffee' was the name given to a scene of a video game that was not a part of the intended finished product, but

remained hidden in the game's code (Bowles, 2005). In the summer of 2005, it was discovered that this hidden scene could be accessed through a series of modifications to the game's code, and instructions for doing so were quickly circulated on the Web. The game was Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, published by Rockstar Games, and the 'Hot Coffee' scene is an explicit, interactive sex scene.

When the game was released in October 2004, the ESRB had originally given it a rating of M for Mature, meaning it was intended for people aged 17 and older. In June 2005, Patrick Wildenborg, a Dutch programmer, posted a game modification on the Web promising that his software would unlock a scene on the game's disc that Rockstar Games never wanted to be seen (Kushner, 2005). The sex scene could be accessed by downloading a software patch or through the use of console accessories (ESRB July 20, 2005). News of this modification to Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas spread over the Web like wildfire.

At first, Rockstar Games blamed hackers for the sex scene, claiming that no one in the company created that scene of the game. Wildenborg said that he did not create the content in question, and that his modification only gave gamers access to material that was already present on the disc (Harris, 2005). With so much media attention on the discovery of this scene, uproar from media watchdog groups and political figures getting involved, such as New York Senator Hillary Clinton and Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman, the pressure was on to find the true origins of the explicit material.

The ESRB launched an investigation on July 8, 2005, to determine whether Rockstar Games violated the rules of full disclosure of content when the game was submitted for review (ESRB, July 8, 2005). By July 20th, the ESRB had decided that

Rockstar Games had in fact breached the ESRB's regulations because the 'Hot Coffee' scene was present on the game disc when it was submitted for the review and rating process. Rockstar Games admitted it had placed the sex scene on the disc, but had taken steps to block access to the scene and had stated "that it was never intended to be made accessible" (ESRB, July 20, 2005).

The ESRB then revoked the game's M rating and it issued a rating of AO or Adults Only, which is a rating that most retail stores refuse to carry (ESRB, July 20, 2005). Less than 1% of games rated by the ESRB in 2004 and in 2005 carried the rating of AO (ESRB, 2006). Rockstar Games agreed to the suggested actions of the ESRB to refund any retailer who wished to return the AO version of the game in exchange for a new version with the explicit content removed that would carry the original M rating, in addition to making available to consumers a software patch that would block access to the 'Hot Coffee' scene. The ESRB revised its review process to require game publishers to either submit all material contained on a game's disc for review, even material not intended for the final version of the game, or to require publishers to remove that content from the disc.

Some worried that this controversy may have damaged the public's trust in the video game rating system. As Patricia Vance, president of the ESRB, said, "The integrity of the ESRB rating system is founded on the trust of consumers who increasingly depend on it to provide complete and accurate information about what's in a game" (ESRB, July 8, 2005). Video game ratings are especially important to parents who may not be familiar with game content in the same way they understand other media content, such as television or movies. For example, a parent can make an educated decision on whether to

allow a child to watch an R-rated movie, but a parent might be unsure about what it means when a game is rated T. If that parent is not a regular consumer of video games, he or she might not have the necessary background knowledge, and therefore cannot make an educated decision.

The issue of rating systems can have implications for policy-making processes. The 'Hot Coffee' controversy prompted Sen. Clinton to announce plans for legislation that would "help keep inappropriate video games out of the hands of children" by introducing fines to retailers who disregard the rating system (Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, July, 2005). In addition to the legislation, she also called on the Federal Trade Commission to investigate both the origins of the 'Hot Coffee' material, as well as the rating practices of the ESRB. In Clinton's letter to the FTC on July 14, 2005, she described the importance of trust in the rating system: "Parents who rely on the ratings to make decisions to shield their children from influences that they believe could be harmful, should be informed right away if the system is broken. Parents face an uphill battle just understanding the ratings system. They cannot and should not be expected to second guess it" (Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, July, 2005).

The FTC responded by posting documents on its Web site in July of 2005 designed to help parents understand the rating system, labeled as "consumer alerts" (FTC Alert, 2005; FTC Video Games, 2005). The Web pages explain the ESRB rating system in detail, both the age categories and the content descriptors. Readers are also given the contact information for the ESRB and the FTC in order to make a complaint about the rating of a game. Although the pages make no references to Grand Theft Auto or the

'Hot Coffee' scandal, it seems natural that the FTC would have anticipated Web traffic after Clinton's involvement in the issue.

The ESRB rating system is little more than a decade old, and research in the area of computer and video game ratings is sparse. So many questions about this relatively new medium were brought to light in the wake of the 'Hot Coffee' controversy. Do parents feel that the ESRB rating system is indeed broken, as Clinton speculates? Also, do parents think the government should get involved in the self-regulating video game industry?

This study will explore these questions, starting with a review of the literature on the history of media rating systems and self-regulation, as well as a look at the concept of government involvement and free speech in regards to rating media content.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review explores not only the history and practices of the ESRB rating system, but also that of the movie, music, television and even discussions of rating the Internet. Industry self-regulation is defined as "a regulatory process in which an industry-level organization (a trade association or a professional society) as opposed to a governmental or firm-level organization, sets and enforces rules and standards relating to the conduct of firms as well as individuals in the industry" (Hemphill, 2003). It is important to understand the entertainment industry's practices of self-regulation, as well as the reactions of the public to this form of regulation.

History and Details of the Media Rating Systems

Rating systems have been described as a "middle ground" between absolutely no rules or guidelines on who can see or buy what types of media products and high levels of government involvement and regulation (Federman, 1998). This review looks at the history of rating systems, starting with the oldest, the rating system for movies, to a discussion of forms of rating on the World Wide Web.

Movies and the MPAA

The rating system for movies is the oldest for media in the United States. The Motion Picture Association of America was created in 1922 as a trade group for the movie industry (Federman, 1998). Between 1931 and 1968, the industry endorsed what was known as the Hays Production Code, which was effectively a list of restrictions that

all movie producers and studios adapted to in an attempt to self-regulate (Federman, 1998). In 1968, the MPAA created a new voluntary film rating system made up of categories that served as guidelines to parents about a film's content (MPAA History, 2006). This new rating system came after U.S. Supreme Court decisions granted the power to states to decide what material children should not be allowed to see (MPAA History, 2006; Federman, 1998). The new MPAA rating system gave the choice of viewing to the consumers by indicating the possibility of questionable content contained in a film. This was different from the Hays Code in that studios were not censored before even releasing a film.

The Rating Board is made up of between 10 and 13 members who are employed by the MPAA. The identities of these members are secret. Studios and distributors pay fees for the ratings service. Qualifications for becoming a member include:

> "a shared parenthood experience, must be possessed of an intelligent maturity, and most of all, have the capacity to put themselves in the role of most American parents so they can view a film and apply a rating that most parents would find suitable and helpful in aiding their decisions about their children and what movies they see" (MPAA Who Rates, 2006).

Once the Board views a film, they discuss the film and its possible rating. Then, each member writes a recommendation for a rating, including a rationale for the choice of rating. The actual rating given to the film is decided by majority vote. If a studio is not satisfied with a rating, the film can be edited and resubmitted to the Board. A Rating Appeals Board is available for those studios wishing to challenge a rating given by the Rating Board (Federman, 1998).

The MPAA also has a division that watches over film advertisements called the MPAA Advertising Administration. This Administration makes certain that all advertising is appropriate to show to all age groups, that the film's rating information is displayed in the advertisement. This includes advertising materials for all print ads, radio and TV spots, press kits, outdoor advertising such as billboards, Internet sites, video or DVD packaging, and trailers for both theatrical and home video releases (MPAA Advertising, 2006).

The current film rating system contains five categories (See Figure 1). The original system created in 1968 has gone through several changes, but overall, has remained the same. The PG-13 category was added in 1984. Some are opposed to this rating as it produces a "grey area" between the PG and R rating (Leone & Osborn, 2004; Medved, 2001). They see it as a way for the MPAA to get "more adult content-most often sex and violence – into an unrestricted film accessible by children of any age" (Leone & Osborn, 2004, pp.86). In 1990, explanations were added to R ratings of movies, and a name change occurred for the final category from the X rating to NC-17. (MPAA How, 2006; Federman, 1998).

Music and the RIAA

While there is no rating system for music, the Recording Industry Association of America uses the *Parental Advisory Label* to warn parents about possible objectionable content in music products, namely, explicit references to violence, sex or substance abuse (RIAA Issues, 2006). In 1985, after Congressional hearings and discussions between the RIAA, the Parents Music Resource Center, headed by Tipper Gore, and the National

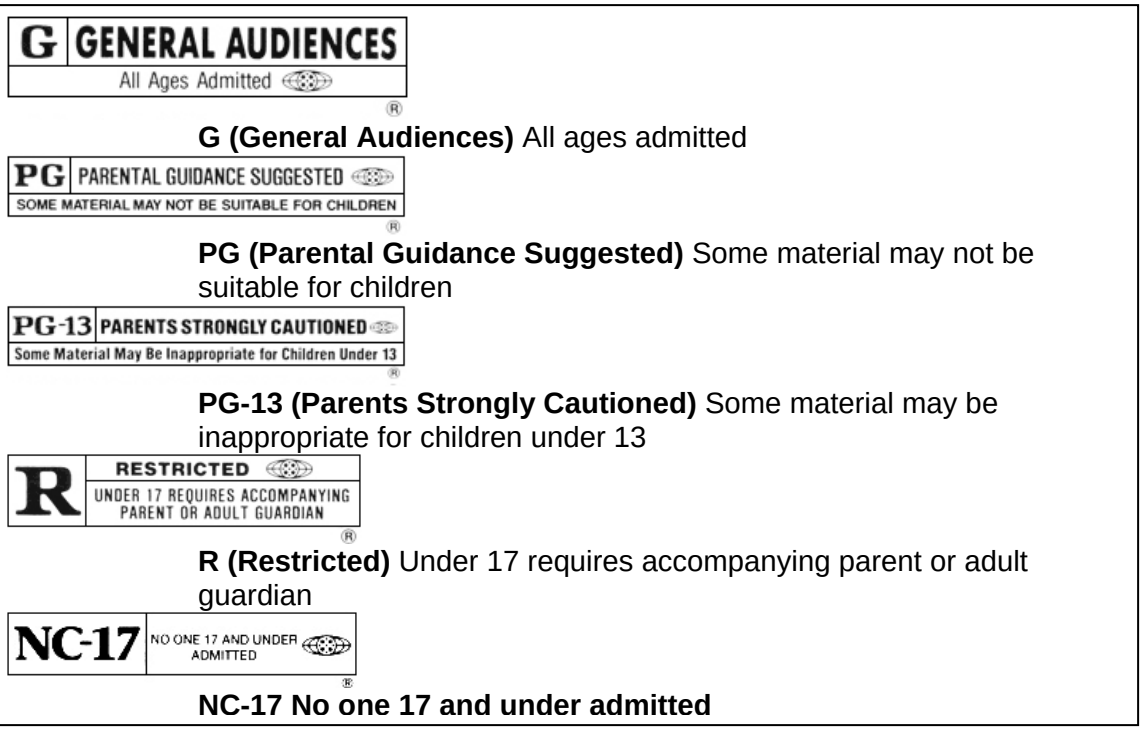

Figure 1. The Current MPAA Rating Categories (MPAA Ratings, 2006).

Parent Teacher Association, the recording industry adopted the voluntary practice of labeling music with explicit content (RIAA Issues, 2006; Federman, 1998).

The RIAA has guidelines to help the record company know whether a recording requires the Parental Advisory Label, such as whether the lyrics, taken in context by the intended audience, would be offensive. The record company and the artist ultimately decide whether to use the sticker on an album. The label is to be used as a guideline:

> "The use of the *Parental Advisory Label* is not a determination of whether a recording is or is not appropriate for particular listeners. Rather, the non-removable label is a "heads up" to parents (and consumers, retailers and wholesalers) that parental discretion is advised when purchasing the particular recording for children or when listening to the recording in the home" (RIAA Issues, 2006).

In order to educate parents and consumers about this voluntary labeling system, this information is posted in record stores:

> **"The Parental Advisory is a notice to consumers that recordings identified by this logo may contain strong language or depictions of violence, sex or substance abuse. Parental discretion is advised"** (RIAA Issues, 2006).

There is also a sticker for an edited version of an explicit album, to let consumers know that it is not the original recording. This edited version, however, may not be completely free of possible objectionable content.

The music industry has guidelines for advertisements that state that materials labeled by the RIAA should include disclosure of this labeling information. All forms of advertisements should contain this information. Advertisements should notify the public when a recording has the Parental Advisory sticker and if an edited version is also available (RIAA Issues, 2006).

Although some have called for a more specific, age-based rating system, the RIAA is reluctant to embrace this idea, in part because of the sheer number of music produced (DiLeonardo & Dee, 2003). Each year, the music industry releases approximately 60,000 songs, in contrast to 600 films rated annually by the MPAA (DiLeonardo & Dee, 2003; RIAA Issues, 2006). A ratings board and process 100 times the size of the MPAA is seen as simply not practical and not possible.

Television and The TV Parental Guidelines

In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed The United States Telecommunications Act, which required that all new televisions contain a V-Chip. This technology allows programs with a certain rating to be blocked, which is why it was deemed a tool for "parental empowerment" (Signorielli, 2005; Warren, 2002; Heins, 1998; Roberts, 1998). A rating system was needed to work with the V-Chip, and three groups, the National Association of Broadcasters, the National Cable Television Association and the Motion Picture Association of America, worked to establish a system. The TV Parental Guidelines Web site explains the ratings were "modeled after the familiar movie ratings, which parents have known and valued for 30 years" (TV Parental, 2006). The Telecommunications Act also gave the Federal Trade Commission the power to create a rating system to work with the V-Chip if the voluntary system created by the television industry was deemed insufficient after one year of use.

This part of the Act caused debate over whether the industry was actually self-regulating, because of the threat from government committee to create a new rating system if the newly established system was unacceptable (Federman, 1998; McDowell & Maitland, 1998). The industry, however, insisted that the rating system was created "voluntarily" (Federman, 1998).

The television industry's first attempt at a rating system in January of 1997 drew immediate criticism for its age-based ratings rather than indications of a show's content (Signorielli, 2005; Federman, 1998). Parents in particular wanted more information about the contents of a show and less about the perceived age-appropriateness of it (Federman, 1998). Other shortcomings of the system were that it was too vague and that

indications of violence or sexual content should be present through the use of content descriptors (Signorielli, 2005; Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004; Hamilton, 1998). The system was revised by the fall of 1997 and remains in use today, with seven ratings categories (See Figure 2).

The TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board ensures "that the ratings are applied with accuracy and consistency" (TV Parental FAQs, 2006) and handles complaints about the rating of a program. The Board does not, however, rate each show. Producers, along with broadcast and cable networks apply the ratings to the programs, and local stations can rate programs according to the regional norms (TV Parental FAQs, 2006; Federman, 1998). Each episode of a program is rated separately, so a show's rating can vary. Television commercials are not rated, but promotions for shows display the rating of that particular show (TV Parental FAQs, 2006).

Video Games and the ESRB

Parents can monitor video games by using the rating system developed by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board. In 1994, the ESRB was formed with the task of rating video and computer games (Federman, 1998). The rating system operates on a voluntary basis: game manufacturers are not required to submit to the ratings, but ESRB's Web site claims that "virtually all games that are sold at retail are rated by the ESRB" (ESRB, 2006).

Video game ratings are decided by agreement between at least three specially trained raters working for the ESRB (ESRB FAQs, 2006). Raters are described as coming from "various ages and backgrounds, and to ensure their objectivity, are not

All Children

This program is designed to be appropriate for all children. Whether animated or live-action, the themes and elements in this program are specifically designed for a very young audience, including children from ages 2 - 6. This program is not expected to frighten younger children.

Directed to Older Children

This program is designed for children age 7 and above. It may be more appropriate for children who have acquired the developmental skills needed to distinguish between make-believe and reality. Themes and elements in this program may include mild fantasy violence or comedic violence, or may frighten children under the age of 7. Therefore, parents may wish to consider the suitability of this program for their very young children.

Directed to Older Children - Fantasy Violence

For those programs where fantasy violence may be more intense or more combative than other programs in this category, such programs will be designated TV-Y7-FV.

General Audience

Most parents would find this program suitable for all ages. Although this rating does not signify a program designed specifically for children, most parents may let younger children watch this program unattended. It contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations.

Parental Guidance Suggested

This program contains material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children. Many parents may want to watch it with their younger children. The theme itself may call for parental guidance and/or the program contains one or more of the following: moderate violence (V), some sexual situations (S), infrequent coarse language (L), or some suggestive dialogue (D).

Figure 2. The TV Parental Guidelines' Current Rating Categories (TV Parental Ratings, 2006).

Parents Strongly Cautioned

This program contains some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14 years of age. Parents are strongly urged to exercise greater care in monitoring this program and are cautioned against letting children under the age of 14 watch unattended. This program contains one or more of the following: intense violence (V), intense sexual situations (S), strong coarse language (L), or intensely suggestive dialogue (D).

Mature Audiences Only

This program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. This program contains one or more of the following: graphic violence (V), explicit sexual activity (S), or crude indecent language (L).

Figure 2. Continued.

permitted to have any ties to the computer and video game industry" (ESRB FAQs, 2006). When a game publisher wants a game rated, a questionnaire is submitted to the ESRB, along with videotaped footage of the "most extreme content and an accurate representation of the context and product as a whole." The three raters independently review the taped footage and recommend the rating and content descriptors. When agreement on the rating is reached, the game publisher is notified of the suggested ratings. When the final version of the game is ready for release, the ESRB checks the packaging for proper display of the rating information, and random parts of the game are played by "ESRB's in-house game experts" (ESRB FAQs, 2006).

Each game is given an age-based category, such as E for Everyone, and one or more content descriptors may be applied to explain why the rating category was assigned to the game. The age-based category, such as the T or M, is placed on the front and back of a game's packaging. The content descriptors are found on the back of the packaging

next to the age-based category rating, and these descriptors explain why a game's rating was applied. The ESRB uses six aged-based ratings categories (See Figure 3) and 32 content descriptors (See Appendix A) to describe content in the games it rates.

A branch of the ESRB called the Advertising Review Council ensures that all advertisements, packaging and promotional materials for video games adhere to the guidelines for displaying ratings information. Principles and guidelines established by the ARC call for responsible marketing practices to be used in advertising for video games and other interactive software. The official name for these guidelines is the Advertising Review Council's Principles and Guidelines for Responsible Advertising Practices. One of these guidelines, for example, works to prohibit "game publishers from targeting audiences for whom products are not appropriate" (ESRB FAQs, 2006).

Another function of the ESRB is the Retail Partnership Program, which works with retailers to try to educate consumers about the rating system by displaying signage and other ratings information. Major retailers, such as Best Buy, Circuit City, Gamestop, KB Toys, Target and Wal-Mart have joined the ESRB in this partnership (ESRB FAQs, 2006). The ESRB's public awareness campaign is called "OK to Play?" and the mission is education about the rating system. Posters and brochures are available to consumers in participating retail stores that explain the rating categories. This branch of the ESRB also encourages and supports retailers to implement policies of age verification for M-rated games, although the organization has no authority to enforce these types of policies (ESRB FAQs, 2006).

EC "Early Childhood" has content that may be suitable for children ages 3 and older

E for "Everyone" has content that may be suitable for ages 6 and older

E10+ for "Everyone 10+" has content that may be suitable for ages 10 and older

T for "Teen" has content that may be suitable for ages 13 and older

M for "Mature" has content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older

AO for "Adults Only" has content that should only be played by persons 18 years and older

RP for "Rating Pending" (the game has been submitted to the ESRB and is waiting final rating)

Figure 3. The Current ESRB Rating Categories (ESRB Game Rating, 2006).

The Internet – Attempts at regulation

There is currently no global rating system for the Internet. The ability to block online content was first welcomed as another way of empowering parents to control what their children access (Weitzner, 1998) but there is also considerable criticism of blocking software from civil rights activists (Weitzner, 1998; Lasica, 1997).

Companies that make filtering software leave the blocking process to the user, so that a parent can select what types of content should be blocked (ICRA, 2006; Weitzner, 1998; Lasica, 1997). Software like CYBERsitter and Net Nanny, both designed for parents, allows users to enter specific URLs or keywords to block information about certain subjects. Critics of this technology argue that this sort of filtering could restrict useful information, and could have a harmful effect on free speech. For example, blocking information about drugs could also block information about addiction recovery and treatment programs (Rosenberg, 2001); supporters of creationism might want to block information about evolutionary theory in school libraries (Rosenberg, 2001); and blocking descriptions of violence could prevent someone from learning about the Holocaust (Weinberg, 1998).

There is no overarching association that reviews and rates every Web site on the Internet. However, attempts to employ an Internet rating system have been made at the government level.

President Clinton called for a voluntary rating system for every Web site in 1997 in an attempt to clean up the Internet and make it "family-friendly" (Lasica, 1997). In an article in *American Journalism Review*, J. D. Lasica (1997) explained the many practical questions that arose from this proposition, such as the problems a news Web site would

face when asked to rate stories about topics such as murder, hate crimes or war. But if news sites were made an exception to this rule, who would decide if a Web site was devoted to news, entertainment or opinion (Lasica, 1997)? These questions show examples of how creating a rating system for Web sites would be a complex undertaking.

Another consideration is that regulation of Internet content is not possible under current U.S. obscenity laws. These laws state that material is deemed obscene by holding it to the current community standards, as determined in Miller v. California (1973) (Linz et al., 1995). The courts are to decide obscenity by considering whether the average person, looking at the work in question as a whole, would find that it is protected under the First Amendment based on the common values of the community. Because of the global nature of the World Wide Web, this community standard is possible neither to achieve nor enforce.

While it is not a rating system, the .kids.us domain was created as a result of government action. President George W. Bush signed a law in 2002 that established the "dot-kids" domain as a place where only child-friendly content is permitted. The idea was to create a portion of the World Wide Web where kids ages 13 and under would have access to approved content, and where they could be "informed, entertained and protected online" (Kids FAQs, 2006). In late 2003, the new site, www.kids.us, was launched by Neustar, the company in charge of regulating content. The site contains categories of links of approved Web sites such as "Science," "News" and "Arts & Entertainment" (Kids, 2006). As of the writing of this study, the most recent press release on the site is dated July 1, 2004, and the copyrights noted on the pages of the Web site have expired as of 2004.

Research and Responses to Rating Systems

Previous studies have attempted to determine the effectiveness of the rating systems by quantifying aspects of a particular medium. These studies sought to gauge if and how the rating system was working for that medium.

Kaye and Sapolsky (2004) found that the rates of offensive language in prime time had gone up from 1997 to 2001, which were the first four years after the television rating system was implemented. The study makes the assertion that since audiences are warned ahead of time about the possibly offensive content, producers and broadcasters feel free to include more of that material in programs.

Signorielli (2005) studied the use of age-based labels and content-based labels on prime-time programming from 1997 through 2003. The study found that age and content rating labels were not equally applied to programs: age-based ratings were used in eight out of ten programs, where content-based ratings were used in less than four out of ten programs. One of the main conclusions is concern over the fact that many of the programs without content-based ratings contained violent and/or sexual material, and Signorielli believes this content should not go unrated.

In a quantitative study of E-rated video games, Thompson and Haninger (2001) found that violence, particularly the reward for completing violent actions in the game, appears in the E-rated category of games. The researchers coded a sample of 55 E-rated games looking for violence, references to alcohol, tobacco and other substances and sexual content. The study found that 64% of the sample of E-rated games contained acts of intentional violence. Of the 32 games that did not receive content descriptors for violence as part of the E rating, 14 of these contained acts of violence. Also included in

the findings were sexual references in two games and the presence of alcohol in one game. The researchers concluded that "an E rating does not automatically signify a level of violence acceptable for very young game players" (Thompson & Haninger, 2001).

Researchers have identified a potential effect of ratings and advisory labels known as the boomerang effect, which is the possibility that children could be attracted to content simply because of the rating (Roberts, 1998; Christenson, 1992). The theory is that children react against the rating or advisory label, feeling that they are being controlled or that material has been censored (Roberts, 1998) so they seek out material with a rating not intended for them. The RIAA denies this connection on the Frequently Asked Questions section of its Web site, saying that the explicit lyrics do not attract children, rather, the rhythm and melody is what they care about (RIAA Issues, 2006).

Parents who wish to regulate the media content that their children access can use not only the rating systems, but can make choices to influence their children's media experiences. Research on parental mediation of children's viewing shows the various ways parents interact with their children in regards to the media. Austin, Bolls, Fujioka & Engelbertson (1999) identified four different patterns of mediation in a study of parental mediation of television viewing. These four categories represent ways that parents either talk to their children about television: positively (the optimists), negatively (the cynics), people who use both positive and negative patterns of discussion (the selectives) and parents who do not often talk to their children about content (the nonmediators).

Studies on the effects of parental mediation of television and other media strive to understand the way parents can influence their children's media perceptions. Nathanson

(2002) investigated some unintended effects of parental mediation, and found changes in adolescents' attitudes toward their parents, toward the content and an increase in the amount of the content viewed with friends.

Other Topics of Video Game Research

Some researchers have investigated parents' estimations of how much video game exposure their children receive. Funk, Hagan and Schimming (1999) studied the perceptions of parents and children in regards to the amount of time a child spent playing video games, the amount of parental supervision while playing video games, the ability to name the child's favorite game and the frustration level experienced by both groups as they played a game. They found that significant differences between the two groups when estimating the amount of supervised playing time and the ability of parents to name the child's favorite game. Parents overestimated the amount of supervised playing time, and most of the participants failed to name their child's favorite game. In these cases, the parent often named what the researchers categorized as a "nonviolent" game while the child named a "violent" game as his or her favorite. The authors suggest that this could mean that parents generally underestimate the amount of exposure their children receive to violent video games.

Another area of research in the subject of video games is gender role stereotyping. In 2002, Beasley and Collins studied gender role stereotyping in video games and the possible effects of this on children by looking at the portrayal of women in 47 video games. They noted that the number of female characters in the sample was 82 out of 597 (13%), which is not representative of the world's population distribution. The team also

examined what kind of role the female characters played in the plot of the game and even developed a way to quantify and rate the clothing worn by the male and female characters and determine how much skin was exposed. The researchers considered video games to have similar effects on children and young adults in terms of learning gender roles, and speculated on the possible effects their results might have on players by applying social learning theory and gender schema theory.

Confusion and Concern over Rating Systems

Previous research has shown that for many people there is confusion over media rating systems and concern over the accuracy of those systems.

A report by The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (2003) examined parents' attitudes toward media rating systems. Nine out of ten parents reported that they think ratings are a good idea, but many get confused and are not aware of what each of the rating categories mean. Many parents in the report supported the creation of a single rating system for all media to eliminate confusion.

The idea of a universal rating system is something that not only the parents in the Kaiser study wanted. A universal rating system has also been discussed by scholars and industry professionals. The TV Parental Guidelines were "modeled after the familiar movie system" (TV Parental Guidelines, 2006). In fact, Jack Valenti, former president of the MPAA who was instrumental in developing the movie rating system in the late 1960s, also helped create the TV Parental Guidelines. In the introduction to their study, Thompson & Haninger (2001) described the E-rated category of video games as "analogous to the G rating of films, which suggests suitability for all audiences." In

2000, the Directors Guild of America expressed the need for one rating system for all entertainment media (Grier, 2001). This issue could become more important when considering the phenomenon of media convergence, as one rating system would cover all combinations and merging of media (Oldenburg, 2005).

People are not only confused about the rating systems and their meanings, but they are concerned about the accuracy and effectiveness as well. Consistency in television ratings is a concern, particularly the ratings between networks for the same types of shows (Oldenburg, 2005). The possibility for inconsistency exists because each episode is rated by the network or producer; also, local networks can adjust ratings based on the standards of the region (TV Parental FAQs, 2006; Federman, 1998).

Leone and Osborn (2004) found that PG-13 movie ratings are not consistent and that they have changed according to social norms. They studied the movie rating PG-13 over a period of three years between 2000 and 2002. The researchers found that during that time, the rating descriptions increased in the amount of adult content, sex and violence found in PG-13 movies, meaning that more adult content is present in PG-13 movies each year. This was a concern because of the prevalence of PG-13 movies and the popularity of these films with children, who have access to them under MPAA guidelines. For example, the researchers note that in 2002, the top 20 grossing films were rated PG-13, and more movies of this rating are being made each year (Leone & Osborn, 2004).

In a study that investigated the rating systems of movies, television and video games, Walsh & Gentile (2001) considered the validity of the ratings systems from a public health point of view, asserting that the rating systems are part of a solution to a

public health problem. They asked participants to decide whether the specific content of movies, television shows and video games were appropriate for certain age groups of children. They compared the participants' results to the ratings given by the respective industry rating boards. The researchers found that overall, the participants agreed on ratings for what was appropriate for younger children, and agreed with material that the industries labeled as not suitable for children. However, parents had different ideas about what the ratings should be for media directed at the adolescent age group. The authors concluded that the current ratings systems do not fulfill their role as protectors of public health and that the rating systems should be revised.

Government Involvement and Legal Battles

In the past, when an issue in the entertainment media has reached a boiling point, members or branches of the government have pressured and warned about implementing new legislation unless the movie, music, video game or television industry responds and corrects the current problem (Rivera, 2006; Oldenburg, 2005; Phillips, 2004).

Senator Clinton called on the FTC to investigate the ESRB in July 2005 in response to the 'Hot Coffee' controversy. The origin of the explicit content, the question of whether Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas deserved an AO rating, and the thoroughness of retailers' age verification process when selling M-rated games, were main concerns of her letter to the FTC (Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, July, 2005).

In November of 2005, Senators Clinton and Lieberman introduced the Family Entertainment Protection Act. The main points of the bill include: the prohibition of selling an M-, AO- or RP-rated game to someone under the age of 17; an annual report

and review of the ESRB and the rating system; power granted to the FTC to investigate ratings that are misleading; the creation of a system for consumer complaints to be registered and reported to Congress; and the authorization for the FTC to conduct random audits at retail outlets to observe the policies of selling games to minors (Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, November, 2005). Clinton makes the same argument for the video game legislation that was made by her husband, President Clinton, for the V-Chip in the 1990s: it is necessary because it "empowers parents" (Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, November, 2005; Heins, 1998).

Clinton's proposed act is similar to laws recently passed in several states, California, Michigan, Illinois and Washington, that attempted to regulate the sale of video games to minors by imposing fines on retailers that sell games that have been labeled "violent" to minors (Rivera, 2006; Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, November, 2005). Some supporters of the legislation compare the sale of so-called violent video games to minors to the prohibition of the sale of cigarettes and pornography to children (Rivera, 2006). These bills were later overturned or blocked by courts because of industry lawsuits (Rivera, 2006). The video game industry argued that such laws would violate the First Amendment rights of the minors (Rivera, 2006).

This issue has made it to court before. In 2003, a case between the Interactive Digital Software Association (now known as the Electronic Software Association) and St. Louis County debated the legality of selling violent video games to minors came to a close. In 2000, St. Louis County, Missouri, declared it illegal for anyone to sell, rent or make available violent games to minors (Phillips, 2004). A lower court had decided that video games were not protected speech because they did not "express ideas, impressions,

feelings or information unrelated to the game itself," but the Eighth Circuit court reversed that decision, based on the idea that video games do have those elements that categorize them as speech and are therefore protected under the First Amendment (Phillips, 2004).

There is the question of whether these laws that do not allow the sale of violent games to minors will be passed in the future. Grier (2001) speculates that "because of First Amendment concerns, the most likely scenario is continuing political heat on the industries to enhance their self-regulation rather than direct government intervention" (pp. 128). The 'Hot Coffee' controversy seemed to start a wave of new legislation and debate about complicated issues that will not be easily solved.

The next section discusses the research questions that were designed to explore these issues. Using qualitative methodology, a sample of parents was asked to discuss their feelings about the video game rating system in a series of interviews and a focus group.

Chapter III: Research Questions

If the video game rating system is designed to help parents choose (ESRB, 2006) and filter games (Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, July, 2005), an important question is: "Are parents using it?" Asking not only if they use it but how they use it will provide insight into the complex arguments and legal disputes over the ways the system can or should be improved. Also important to explore is whether parents use the system as it was intended to be used, or, as politicians and researchers assume it is being used.

To investigate consumer attitudes toward the video game rating system and its influence on game purchases, the following research questions were developed:

RQ_1: Are parents/consumers aware of the ESRB rating system?

RQ_2: Do parents/consumers understand and trust the system?

RQ_3: Is the rating system a factor for parents/consumers when making decisions about what games to purchase for children?

Because the literature on media rating systems frequently involves the subject of government involvement and free speech infringement, parents will be asked their opinions about these issues. Political and industry leaders debate what is in the best interests of children, parents and society, and the perspective of parents could be valuable to future debates. These questions were designed:

RQ_4: How do parents feel about the proposed laws that would outlaw the sale of M-rated games to minors?

RQ_5: Do parents feel that the rating systems are telling them how they should raise their children?

Finally, to gauge if and how the recent Grand Theft Auto scandal may have affected parents' attitudes toward the rating system or video game industry, the following questions were developed:

RQ_6: Have parents heard of the recent controversy with the Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas game?

RQ_7: Did that change their opinions of the rating system in any way?

With so much recent media attention on video games and the ESRB rating system that was designed to help parents make choices, it is important to find out what parents think about these issues. This study will explore the questions of if and how parents use the ESRB's rating system. Also under investigation are parents' feelings about government involvement with the media, and the extent of their knowledge of the current 'Hot Coffee' controversy.

Chapter IV: Method

In the spring 2005 semester, I investigated this topic through the use of a survey I designed to assess parents' awareness of the rating system and whether they used the rating system in their purchasing decisions. Using the mall intercept technique for survey administration, I spoke with parents as they exited a video game retail store and spent roughly 5 to 10 minutes conducting the survey.

Participants had to answer 'yes' to a screening question of whether they purchased games for their children who were under the age of 18. Although this assumes the unlikely situation that children under 18 do not obtain a video game unless a parent buys it for them, the logic was that because the rating system was designed to help parents make choices about what to buy their children, exploring how parents use and understand the system was important to research.

A total of 52 participants were recruited to participate in the 17-question survey (See Appendix B). Results of the survey showed that the technique did not give me the answers I needed to properly explore this topic. Many of the questions required longer, more complicated answers that could not be easily quantified. The survey revealed the variety of ways people form opinions and also shed light on the complexities of a consumer's decision-making process, and a new method of inquiry was necessary to obtain that in-depth information. I concluded that a qualitative approach would be the next logical step to explore and understand people's feelings toward and use of the video game rating system.

For this thesis project I chose a combination of two qualitative methods: the focus group and the long interview. These techniques allow for the deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and feelings, as well as their accounts and explanations of their behavior (Lindlof, 1995). I attempted to collect a well-rounded sample by using the focus group and the interview techniques, as each have advantages and disadvantages. An interview with a participant can reveal "the categories and logic by which he or she see the world" (McCracken, 1988), but lacks the spontaneity of a conversation in a group setting. Focus groups have the benefit of capturing peers talking and interacting together, but a downside to this technique is sometimes a participant can dominate the conversation and other participants do not feel comfortable sharing their opinions (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

Participants

The necessary steps were taken to obtain approval from the IRB and the Office of Research. Participants were recruited through the use of flyers, which indicated that parents who buy video games for their children were needed for a study. Like the survey I conducted, participants qualified for the study if they were a parent who purchased video games for his or her child or children who are under the age of 18. Again, the purpose of this was to gauge how the rating system was being used and understood by the audience and purpose for which it was created.

Recruitment flyers were posted throughout the University of Tennessee campus, at all three locations of Game Haven retail stores in the Knoxville area, and on the community bulletin boards of area Wal-Mart stores. The flyer was also e-mailed to

certain departments at UT from which I obtained permission. Recruitment on the UT campus was completed because of the number of qualified staff and faculty that could be reached by the flyers, and the convenience for those participants to the location of the focus groups and interviews. Details on what would be discussed in the study were not revealed on the flyer to avoid any planned responses during the sessions. When the participants responded to the flyer, they were placed either in a focus group or in an interview held during the month of February in the Communications Building at UT.

Compensation of a free movie pass was offered to participants in exchange for their participation in the study. A grand prize drawing was also held for a $50 gift certificate to Game Haven, a local group of video game stores.

The participants were recruited from the Knoxville area. There were four males and five females in the sample. A total of nine parents participated in a long interview or the focus group; five participated in the focus group and four were interviewed. Data collection was stopped at this point because of the nature of qualitative methods to delve into the qualities and feelings of a small number of people rather than to find out how many and what kinds of people share characteristics (Lindlof, 1995; McCracken, 1988). In contrast to a quantitative approach, such as the survey I conducted in the spring 2005 semester, the focus of the long interview is that it is preferable to spend more time with a fewer number of people and get more detail about the way they feel about the issue under study. McCracken (1988) was used as a guide to obtain the total number of recruited participants. He states that "for many research projects, eight respondents will be perfectly sufficient" (McCracken, 1988).

The parents reported buying games for a total of 14 children; 10 boys and four girls. Four of the participants bought games for one child, and five participants bought games for two children. The children's ages ranged from 6 years old to 14 years old, and half of the children were age 11.

Data Collection

Informed consent was obtained upon a participant's arrival to the focus group or interview. Two graduate students assisting the project also signed confidentiality statements. The focus group and interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. The tapes were then destroyed. Participants' confidentiality was maintained through the use of a number given to each participant in the focus group. Names were not used on the recording of the focus group, as each participant was referred to by his or her number. The graduate note takers also used these numbers to refer to the person speaking.

A list of "grand tour" questions was prepared and used to start conversations and allow participants to reflect upon and discuss their opinions on the issues presented. The moderator also gave prompts and explanations when necessary. Interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and the focus group took about one hour.

Data Analysis

The transcriptions of the focus group and interviews were analyzed by the investigator and the two graduate students assisting with the study using the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Glaser, Barney & Strauss, 1967). Coders read through the transcripts, constantly comparing their observations and forming

categories with the goal of distilling these into overarching themes. The coders looked for common patterns and topics in the data, such as points they might emphasize, dramatize, or are confused by (Goodman & Walsh-Childers, 2004). The data was coded and discussed until broader categories and general themes emerged.

Chapter V: Results

The participants were willing and enthusiastic when talking about their opinions of the video game rating system. They seemed to discuss their choices and beliefs candidly. Some noted that they had gained insight into their own behaviors or that they had not thought about a certain issue before the focus group or interview.

Several broad themes were identified after analysis of the focus group and interview transcripts. This section begins with a look at how the rating system is used by parents, followed by examining how parents understand the system. Other themes of family dynamics, judging and comparing other parents, opinions of government involvement and comments on the 'Hot Coffee' controversy are also explored.

How parents use the system

The participants in the study showed that parents aren't blindly following the rating system when making decisions about their children and that they use parts of it in different ways. Because of the personal nature of parenting, the rating system is adopted and adapted differently by each individual user.

Parents are more likely to follow the rating of a game without question when they make the decision to exclude a game. The age-based rating or a content descriptor can be enough to make them not buy a game without further investigation to the game's content. One participant said, "I know E we can buy and the Ms we can't…the 'mature' – we just leave that alone." But parents use more scrutiny when they are deciding to buy a game – in addition to the rating and the information on the box, they reported that they will read

reviews, and ask friends, family members or a store employee about the game before deciding to purchase it.

One major factor in the way a participant reported using the rating system is that person's value system. This played heavily into how the rating system worked for parents because everyone has different values and standards for their children, which means that different people get more or less out of the rating system. Participants also varied in their main concerns when looking at video game ratings. Some were concerned with violence; some with language and for some, sex was their biggest concern in the video games that their children play.

One participant said she does not use the rating system when buying video games for her son. In fact, she doesn't decide what to buy him, she lets "him decide because, I mean, you've got to trust him at some point." She emphasizes the importance of parents in teaching children "right from wrong" and that video games are not real, they are just games.

One concern about language is that the ratings categories are not always as strict as the participants would like them to be. One parent said, "I've seen a couple that have had curse words in it and they weren't labeled." Others agreed that opinions about acceptable language for video games for children differ greatly from parent to parent based on his or her values.

Another participant, a self-described "video game head" himself, said that his 11-year-old son plays M-rated games, "but only Mature games that don't have sexual themes." He said the games are "almost indubitably shooters of one sort or another, which puts them in the M category." Violence in video games is not an issue for the

participant, but references to sex are unacceptable for his child. He said, "…with the violence, yeah we let that slide, but the sexual themes, we don't."

Regarding the participants' concern for violence, the point was also made that violence should be taken in context. For example, participants were more lenient with war games. One participant explained that, "If it's rated for violence then and it's a war game I look at it a little bit differently than if it was a street violence type thing." Another noted that, "Some people might have a dad from the service, and they may think the war games are OK for them."

An important point to the participants is that they made the final decisions on what games their children would be allowed to play. Many of the participants believed that it was ultimately the parent's responsibility to oversee what games their children would have. One participant captured this sentiment by saying that the information about the ratings is "up to me…I can take it or leave it." Others focused on the role of the parents in the decision-making process and said, "…you gotta know how to raise your kids," and, "I think it's the parent's responsibility to step in and teach their children that this is right and this is wrong. To me, that's how it falls with these video games." One participant said that children could have any kind of game their parents are willing to buy for them, "It's up to the parents, they can put whatever on the box but I mean, they're still gonna get it if they want it."

Video game ratings were seen in an overall positive light as "guidelines" that can help parents. One parent said, "I think [video games are] hard to keep up with. It's good to have some help like that." Another said, "I don't think that ratings are censorship. I mean, things are still out there for people to view but the ratings, I think, are useful

guides." There were no feelings from the participants that the rating system was overbearing, and most felt like the information was at their disposal. One person said, "Actually, I am for rating systems, but only as information. In other words 'here's what's in this – you can get it if you want' but there you go."

Sometimes parents don't use the rating system. Participants reported that sometimes it is not necessary to look at a game's rating, for example, if it is a game they feel like they are familiar with. One participant said she did not feel the need to check the rating on games such as Mario or Pacman. Another said, "I mean, Finding Nemo I knew it was probably going to be good, so I don't know that I actually looked at it just knowing that it would be safe."

How parents understand the rating system

In some ways, the participants did not show a clear understanding of the rating system. One source of confusion was the criteria of how a game received a certain rating, but this sometimes reflected on the value system of that participant. One participant said, "We've got some games that have been for 'everyone' that weren't really for everyone." And another said:

> "My son was given a game that was T for 'teen' and I looked on the back of the box and it said violence but there was bad language in it, too. It didn't say that on the box. It was mild curse words and so maybe they didn't feel like they had to mention it."

Some mentioned that the content descriptors were helpful to explain why a game got placed in a certain category. However, one participant hit on the idea that ratings can

reflect a person's value system and said, "I don't know how bad it has to be before they actually note it on there: 'Bad Language.'"

Some also had problems committing to an answer to several "yes or no" questions regarding whether they trusted the rating system and whether they thought it was accurate. One participant commented on the accuracy of the ratings by saying, "Some are and some aren't; it varies." This participant also said that she only buys E-rated games for her children; even if she doesn't completely trust the accuracy of the ratings, she still uses the system in some way. Others gave answers to the accuracy and trust questions like "generally yes" or "Oh, reasonably so" and "Um, no, I don't think so." It seemed that parents were lacking in confidence in these answers to these questions. Or perhaps parents felt like they were put on the spot by having been asked in such a direct manner.

The participants seemed to understand the video game rating system by comparing it to that of movies. This comparison was made many times and it is clear that parents are better able to grasp the video game rating system this way. Also, since many adults watch movies, there is a deeper understanding of the movie rating system, not to mention that it is also the oldest media rating system.

Family Dynamics

The participants talked about how they handle input from their children about what games they wanted. A broad spectrum of control and mediation over the child's choice of games was reflected in the participants' responses. Most of the parents bought what the child wanted, provided the game had an acceptable rating and price; but

responses ranged from a parent who bought any game the child asked for regardless of the rating, to a parent who did not ask what the child wanted but picked games that he thought were appropriate.

Some children tell their parents which titles to buy for them. Two parents joked that when they go to the store to buy games, "They make sure you know what they want," and that, "It's written down. I know exactly what they want." Parents noted that children decide what games they want by listening to friends at school, by playing them with friends or relatives or by seeing them advertised on TV.

Participants also talked about what their children might be exposed to at friends' houses. They acknowledged that they don't have control over what their children might come into contact with, and expressed concern over that. One parent mentioned a friend of her son who had reportedly seen several R-rated movies and said, "you don't know what your kids are seeing when they go to a friend's house."

The research revealed that more of the fathers in the study play video games with their kids than the mothers. Most of the male participants said that they played games with their children, and many female participants mentioned that their husbands played games with the children. Participants were not asked about which parent bought more video games for the household, but each parent in the study had experience buying games for their children, as that was part of the criteria for participation in this study.

Judging and being judged

One theme present in the data was that of judgment being passed on parents' actions. Participants in the study talked about Wal-Mart employees who tried to

discourage them or other parents from buying a certain game for a child. Participants also judged other parents' purchasing decisions and compared themselves to other parents.

Some participants talked about the practice of Wal-Mart employees warning parents that a certain game may not be appropriate for their child. While they may just be following Wal-Mart's company policy of compliance with the ESRB's education efforts, one participant felt the employee was judging him when he once tried to purchase a game for his child. He said the employee told him "the bad points of the game" and discouraged him to purchase it for his son. He seemed somewhat defensive, as if the scene at Wal-Mart made him slightly uncomfortable, as he explained:

> "It's like he was trying to get me not to buy it, but I bought it anyway. It was almost like he was questioning me, asking if that game was going to be for my son, who's 14 but looks like he's 10. I just had to convince him to let me buy it."

Another participant saw a similar scene in a Wal-Mart while she was in line to buy a video game. The participant said she saw a woman attempting to buy Grand Theft Auto for her child. The employee asked for the child's age and then "very strongly discouraged her from buying this game for her son based on the age that he was." The participant said that she was "very impressed" because "this was a teenage kid who was kind of lecturing this woman who was much older than he was about why she shouldn't do what she was doing."

The participant was impressed by the clerk's attempts of regulating the sale of a game, but one question is "How did that parent feel?" Did that parent feel judged by the employee, or perhaps embarrassed because there was another parent present at that time?

The Wal-Mart employees' tactics regarding the sale of video games were probably created with good intentions, but parents might not appreciate this kind of pressure, especially if they have already decided to purchase a game for their children regardless of the rating. This reinforces the idea that parents feel that it's ultimately their decision what their children should be allowed to play.

Sometimes participants talked about other parents and the choices they made regarding video games and their children. The same participant who was impressed by the Wal-Mart employee's talk with a woman buying Grand Theft Auto for her child said this about that parent, "And it was a very young child, I was just amazed, and I've heard a lot about that game and I'm like 'OK, what are you thinking?'"

Another participant said this about the need for a rating system, "…some parents don't have that learning or knowledge of what's appropriate, so I think it's good to have some guidelines, but not necessarily everybody needs them."

Another participant said this about minors playing M-rated games, "Their parents buy it for them and that's the thing that boggles my mind." She disapproves of those parents because they allow their children to access M-rated games. She later revealed why she believes children should not access those games and why she and her husband don't have cable TV: "…we're really particular about what [our son] sees, because I kind of feel like if you put that into your mind it comes out in your life." For this participant, just being exposed to certain material is unacceptable, as it is detrimental to the child's well-being.

Another participant anticipates other people disapproving of her choices to let her son play M-rated games. She said, "I might get downed for letting my son play some of

this stuff." But she also said that she talks to him about the game's content and language and teaches him "right from wrong." She said, "Yeah ok, you can blow the guy's head off, set him on fire, run over the cops, but he don't – it's just a game to him." She also tells her son that if he starts to repeat the language in the games that she will take them away. For this parent, it's not a matter of preventing children from seeing content, but that the children understand the fictional nature of the game and that the game's actions and language are not repeated.

This reflects, as previously mentioned, how each person uses the rating system according to his or her value system when buying games for his or her children. Parents sometimes compare or judge other parents' opinions and actions, but all parents have certain rules and choices they believe to be the best for their children.

Thoughts on Proposed Laws and 'Hot Coffee'

In response to specific questions about both the creation of laws barring minors from purchasing games and the Hot Coffee scandal, several key points were apparent in the analysis of the data.

Participants believed that the rating system should be enforced, and that having laws that would hold a retailer accountable for the sale of M-rated games to minors would help the enforcement of the system. They recognized that a parent would still have the right to buy a game for his or her child even if the child were unable to purchase it. One participant said:

> "I think you should enforce it because they're still minors in the sense that you know, even if all it means is that the parent has to buy it for their child instead of the child

> buying at least somewhere in the process you got an adult involved. And the same thing as movies, you got the system in place, why have these game ratings that have no enforcement? What's the point?"

Another participant said of the proposed laws:

> "I think that would probably be fine, really. That would give the parents the control they *think* they have but don't. I mean, it's like keeping kids out of R-rated movies, I mean, good luck. So I'm for the fines, but people won't like me for that."

One participant did not agree with this kind of government involvement and said that video games should not be treated like tobacco, alcohol or pornography. He was bothered by video game sales to minors being treated in the same way because the situation with video games "is somewhat more acceptable, or less unacceptable, than something that is clearly currently and widespread illegal."

In regards to 'Hot Coffee,' not many of the participants had heard of the controversy. Three out of the nine participants were familiar with the situation. The concepts of "fault" and "blame" arose in almost every conversation about the hidden sex scene on the Grand Theft Auto disc. Upon hearing of the controversy, participants almost immediately questioned who was to blame. After further discussion of the circumstances and outcomes, many did not blame the ESRB, though some said it may have changed their opinion of the rating system. Many blamed the company or the programmers, saying "If it's hidden then I don't see how the rating system can be to blame," and, "I would fault the game maker for doing that in the first place," and, "That's out of control there, that's really the programmers' fault." Another said:

> "Technically speaking [the ratings board] couldn't have known, there was absolutely no way for them to know

> unless they had their own programmer looking at every bit of code on the disc, and really that would take up a lot of time."

One thing to point out would be that none of the participants placed any blame or fault on parents who had bought the then-M-rated version of the game for children under 17. No one raised the point that had parents adhered to the rating system, then no children under 17 would have seen this interactive sex scene. Patricia Vance, president of the ESRB, alluded to this in a press release responding to Senator Hillary Clinton's involvement in the controversy stating that even before the news of the 'Hot Coffee' scene, the game was not intended for children under 17 and that the rating contained content descriptors, one of which was "Strong Sexual Content" (ESRB July 14, 2005).

However, parents have the right to exercise their choice over what they allow their children to play. In fact, two of the study's participants had bought Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas for their children. One knew about the sex scene and one did not prior to this study, but neither one has a game console with access to online play or to the modification to unlock the hidden scene and felt confident their children did not access the 'Hot Coffee' scene.

Participants showed a distrust of the company that makes the Grand Theft Auto series, Rockstar Games. Several felt that Rockstar created the 'Hot Coffee' scene as a marketing ploy. One participant said:

> "I wonder to what extent it could have been a rogue programmer who put it in just to entertain himself…I still wonder if Rockstar Games – how ignorant they can really claim to be about it. I mean, a few months after the game comes out something like this gets leaked and the game sells another million just like that. You wonder."

Another participant laughed at Rockstar Games' claim that the scene, though placed on the game's disc by the company, was never supposed to be accessed. He said in a sarcastic and then mocking tone, "Okaaayyy, yeah. 'We're going to sell a lot of stuff!'" Someone else shared this sentiment and discussed "the publicity of making people want to go out and buy it."

One participant believed the timing of the 'Hot Coffee' scandal was premeditated by Rockstar Games. He said, "It almost seems like Rockstar had to have known and planned it this way so when the popularity starts going down after three months, you know, I mean who could find this stuff?" While the game had actually been out for seven months and not three, the principle remains the same. He also mentioned that his children had already begun to talk about the upcoming release of the studio's next game in the Grand Theft Auto series before the 'Hot Coffee' controversy happened, which seemed to be evidence to him that the studio planned the event to attract attention.

Chapter IV: Discussion

The biggest conclusion is that there is no one way, and no correct way, for parents to use the video game rating system. The topic is quite subjective because each parent has a different way of using it, and a different way of raising his or her child.

For the most part, the video game rating system is working for this study's participants. The parents have learned how to use the system to get the information they want and that is most important to them and their value systems. The parents also know how to interpret the rating system's information in a way that makes the most sense for their family.

There were some times that the system did not work for these parents, such as the cases when they disagreed on a rating because of language or because they did not believe the E-rated game was for "everybody." These were cases where the participants' values did not match with those of the ESRB raters. Not everyone will always have the same opinion, and the ESRB's Web site has an online form to field concerns about the ratings assigned to games (ESRB FAQs, 2006).

One topic that parents could interpret in a variety of ways was the subject of violence in war games. Some participants thought that violence taken in the context of war would be more acceptable than other forms of interpersonal violence. On this same note, in their article studying the levels of violence in E-rated games, Thompson and Haninger (2001) discussed the difficulty of categorizing certain types of violence because of the possible interpretations of it. They found that coding the sports games and racing

games in their sample were difficult, because actions such as checking in hockey and tackling in football could be considered violent by some people and not by others.

Several parents reported that there were other times when parents were upset about the content of a game they had purchased, but they realized that they had neglected to check the rating of that particular game before buying, and that the rating had been there the whole time. Had they used the rating system before buying, they could have avoided the objectionable content.

Perhaps one of the biggest examples of the rating system failing parents is the 'Hot Coffee' controversy. But this depends on who you ask. Parents in the study did not feel that the rating system was at fault or could have prevented the distribution of the hidden sex scene on the original release of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. However, politicians (Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, November, 2005) and media watchdog groups like the National Institute for Media and the Family were quick to point the finger at the ESRB for the presence of the offensive material and call for an independent rating system (NIMF, 2005).

Given the complex nature of the ways different parents use the ESRB rating system, it would be interesting to know how the government would measure whether the system was working in the annual review under the Family Entertainment Protection Act. Would they simply conduct surveys of parents to find out their opinions on the system, in the fashion of a customer satisfaction survey? It is possible that they would have other ways of measuring the rating system's value or effectiveness, but one concern would be whether that analysis of the rating system would lose the various interpretations by parents about how the system helps them chose the right games for their children.

The research questions of this study have been addressed in the data collection, analysis and interpretation. The method used produced results that showed how and why the parents felt about the issues surrounding the video game rating system. The research questions will be examined here and a summary of the findings thus far will follow.

RQ_1: Are parents/consumers aware of the ESRB rating system?

Yes, all of the parents in the study were aware that video games had a rating system. They had, at the very least, a vague notion of the kinds of categories used in the system. The most informed participants seemed to know the ins and outs of the rating system and how they made it work for their purposes.

RQ_2: Do parents/consumers understand and trust the system?

Understanding and trusting the rating system were not as universal among the participants as awareness of the system. One way parents seemed to try to understand the rating system is to compare it to the rating system for movies. A comparison was never made with the television ratings system, only with that of the movies. This could be because the MPAA's system is the oldest and parents might be more familiar with it.

Another possibility for comparison to the MPAA rating system is that it is much more public than that of TV. For example, participants discussed that they see children in R-rated movies with their parents. They generally did not approve of the child seeing that particular movie when they witnessed this. The participants also could have seen a parent in a video store renting an R-rated movie for a child. However, the participants do not necessarily know what other parents' children are allowed to watch on TV at home because they never see it. They might not understand what is normal, or how other

parents use the TV rating system, so it is not used as a reference point in the same way that movie ratings are used.

Because the study's parents understand the movie rating system so well, perhaps in the future the ESRB could partner with the MPAA, if only for the sake of educational purposes. Parents who are new to video games might get a better initial understanding of the ESRB rating system if they had some kind of equivalency chart listing the corresponding movie rating. Taking this idea a step further, perhaps the merging of all media rating systems is a possibility for the future, as previous research has demonstrated this desire from parents (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003) and industry leaders (Grier, 2001).

RQ_3: Is the rating system a factor for parents/consumers when making decisions about what games to purchase for children?

In the previous section, it was found that participants weren't sure about whether they trusted or thought the rating system was accurate. However, the same participants who did not quite understand the system reported that they use it to make purchasing decisions. One question that arises from this seeming contradiction is "Why use the rating system if you don't trust it?" But that question implies that the point of the rating system is to be an absolute, all-or-nothing method of determining what is best for a child. The results of this study have discovered that this is not the case. These parents use the rating system as more of an awareness tool, and they can still use their own judgment about what is best for their children.

RQ_4: How do parents feel about the proposed laws that would outlaw the sale of M-rated games to minors?

Most participants were in favor of these laws, and their logic was that the rating system should be enforced. A parent could still buy the game for his or her child if there was a law preventing the child from buying it from the retail store. One participant felt strongly against this legislation because he didn't believe that video games should be treated in the same way as alcohol, cigarettes and pornography in terms of the availability to minors and the fines for illegal sales to minors. Interestingly, this same argument was used, only it was the exact opposite of this participant's opinion, by supporters of bills trying to create these laws to penalize retailers and regulate the video game industry (Rivera, 2006).

RQ_5: Do parents feel that the rating systems are telling them how they should raise their children?

No, the parents in the study saw the rating system as a guideline, or an option to be agreed or disagreed with. Some participants welcomed the ratings because of the help they bring to parents.

RQ_6: Have parents heard of the recent controversy with the Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas game?

Three out of the nine participants had heard of the controversy, the other six were not aware of it.

RQ_7: Did that change their opinions of the rating system in any way?

While the participants did not place any blame the ESRB for the 'Hot Coffee' controversy, some did say that it could have changed their opinion of the rating system if they had heard about it as it happened. For those participants who had heard of it, there was no change in their opinions of the rating system.

This research contributes to the body of knowledge of mass communication in that it helps us to understand how parents use the video game rating system, which also has significance for policy makers. Because the rating system was designed to help parents make choices about video game purchases, it is important to get feedback from parents about the rating system. If the government passes the Family Entertainment Protection Act, it means a substantial and direct impact on the video game industry, and the possibility that the rating system could be changed. The opinions of parents and the way they use the rating system should be considered if the government or any other group decides to assess the effectiveness of the ESRB rating system.

Based on the findings in this study, it is important to understand the concept of each parent's value system and how it might differ from what someone else believes is right for their children. In their study, Walsh and Gentile (2001) concluded the rating system was not serving its purpose because parents in the study did not agree on the appropriateness of age-based ratings given to media content for certain age groups. Perhaps this is evidence of a larger trend, that parents may never agree on which ratings are appropriate for children, in part because of the personal nature of parenting. Perhaps this shows that parents do not use rating systems the way these systems were intended to be used. Maybe it does not mean that there is something wrong with the current rating systems, but that perceptions about how parents are using these systems should change.

Taking this information into account when evaluating rating systems is vital. Also, the idea that parents might want to have the final decision on what games to buy their children, and that they might see the ratings as more of a guideline than an absolute truth should be considered.

One weakness of this study was that it relied on parents to talk about their behaviors and opinions honestly and accurately. A parent might not remember certain games or shopping scenarios during the course of a focus group or an in-depth interview. Also, a parent might not wish to talk about certain instances for fear of being judged. However, the parents in this study were able to provide valuable information and insight into many aspects of their thought processes and behavior.

Another weakness is the low sample size of the study. The sampling procedure yields a small sample size, and ideally, conducting at least one more focus group would have been preferable. Though qualitative methodology does not lend itself to generalizability, the results of this study can be used to guide future research.

A suggestion for future study is to examine who buys the games for the children or for the family. As noted previously, it was found that many fathers play games with their children. In regards to the female participants that reported their husbands playing games with the children, they answered questions about the purchasing process in their household. The parent who plays video games with his or her child might have a better insight into what games might be more appropriate or appealing to the child. A question for future study is to look at who is the primary buyer of video games for the children or the family – is it the parent who plays the games with the children? If so, how does that parent use the rating system? Is it different from the way a parent unfamiliar with video games uses it? These questions could shed further light on the way parents use the video game rating system.

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Appendices

Appendix A

The 32 ESRB Content Descriptors

- **Alcohol Reference** - Reference to and/or images of alcoholic beverages
- **Animated Blood** - Discolored and/or unrealistic depictions of blood
- **Blood** - Depictions of blood
- **Blood and Gore** - Depictions of blood or the mutilation of body parts
- **Cartoon Violence** - Violent actions involving cartoon-like situations and characters. May include violence where a character is unharmed after the action has been inflicted
- **Comic Mischief** - Depictions or dialogue involving slapstick or suggestive humor
- **Crude Humor** - Depictions or dialogue involving vulgar antics, including "bathroom" humor
- **Drug Reference** - Reference to and/or images of illegal drugs
- **Edutainment** - Content of product provides user with specific skills development or reinforcement learning within an entertainment setting. Skill development is an integral part of product
- **Fantasy Violence** - Violent actions of a fantasy nature, involving human or non-human characters in situations easily distinguishable from real life
- **Informational** - Overall content of product contains data, facts, resource information, reference materials or instructional text
- **Intense Violence** - Graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict. May involve extreme and/or realistic blood, gore, weapons, and depictions of human injury and death
- **Language** - Mild to moderate use of profanity
- **Lyrics** - Mild references to profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol, or drug use in music
- **Mature Humor** - Depictions or dialogue involving "adult" humor, including sexual references
- **Mild Violence** - Mild scenes depicting characters in unsafe and/or violent situations
- **Nudity** - Graphic or prolonged depictions of nudity
- **Partial Nudity** - Brief and/or mild depictions of nudity
- **Real Gambling** - Player can gamble, including betting or wagering real cash or currency
- **Sexual Themes** - Mild to moderate sexual references and/or depictions. May include partial nudity
- **Sexual Violence** - Depictions of rape or other sexual acts
- **Simulated Gambling** - Player can gamble without betting or wagering real cash or currency
- **Some Adult Assistance May Be Needed** - Intended for very young ages
- **Strong Language** - Explicit and/or frequent use of profanity

- **Strong Lyrics** - Explicit and/or frequent references to profanity, sex, violence, alcohol, or drug use in music
- **Strong Sexual Content** - Graphic references to and/or depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including nudity
- **Suggestive Themes** - Mild provocative references or materials
- **Tobacco Reference** - Reference to and/or images of tobacco products
- **Use of Drugs** - The consumption or use of illegal drugs
- **Use of Alcohol** - The consumption of alcoholic beverages
- **Use of Tobacco** - The consumption of tobacco products
- **Violence** - Scenes involving aggressive conflict

(ESRB Game Rating, 2006)

Appendix B

The Video Game Rating System Parent Survey

1. For how many children or teens do you buy games?

   _____

2. What are their ages and gender?

   _____

3. As best you can recall, how many games do you usually purchase?

___per week ___per month ___per year

___other_____

4. How familiar are you with the ESRB rating system for video games?

___very familiar ___somewhat familiar ___not too familiar ___not at all familiar

5. What best describes your opinion of the accuracy of the rating system?

___very accurate ___somewhat accurate ___don't know ___not too accurate

__not at all accurate

6. How often does the rating of a game influence your decision whether to purchase it?

__every time I buy a game ___very often ___don't know ___not very often

___never

7. Think about the children you usually buy games for – which of these ratings do you usually purchase for them?

___EC ___E ___E10+ ___T ___M ___AO

8. Have you ever decided not to purchase a game just based on its rating?

___yes ___no

9. When purchasing games for your or others' children, what factors help you decide what games to buy? Do you:

___read a review of the game ___ask a store employee's opinion of the game

___ask the child what he or she wants ___ask friends about the game

___other_____

10. Children are exposed to many influences in their daily lives. What kind of influence do video games have on children?

___very positive ___positive ___neutral ___negative ___very negative

___don't know

11. How concerned are you personally about what children see or hear in video games?

___very concerned ___somewhat concerned ___neutral ___not too concerned

___not at all concerned

12. Still thinking about what children see or hear, which of these are you *most* concerned about? ___TV ___the Internet ___video games ___movies __music __don't know

13. What is your gender? ___Female ___Male

14. Which of these categories reflects your age?

___18-24 ___25-34 ___35-44 ___45-54 ___55-64 ___65-74 ___75+

15. What is the last grade you completed in school? _____

16. Which of these categories reflects your household's annual income?

___Under $20,000 ___$20,000-$29,999 ___$30,000-$39,999

___$40,000-$49,999 ___$50,000-$59,999 ___$60,000 or more

17. How often do you play video games?

___never __few times per month ___few times per week ___every day

Vita

Alexis Brekke earned her bachelor's degree in psychology from Boston University. After moving to Knoxville, she decided to continue her education at the University of Tennessee. The field of journalism had always been of interest to Alexis, and the master's program at the School of Communication and Information allowed her to explore and develop her potential in that area.